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David Stoll Breaks the Silence

David Stoll

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Siglo XXI, Guatemala City, Wednesday, January 27, 1999

With my book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Westview Press, 1998), I wanted to encourage more survivors to share their experiences of violence. That is why I am pleased that historian Arturo Taracena has given his own point of view in an interview published in *El Periódico de Guatemala* on January 10.

As a representative of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) in Paris, in 1982, it was Taracena who introduced Rigoberta Menchú to Elisabeth Burgos. He also participated in the editorial work entrusted to Burgos and served as an adviser to the future Nobel Peace Prize winner, giving him an honorable place in Guatemalan history.

In 1997–98, I requested an interview with Taracena on two occasions. He did not respond. That did not surprise me because it was evident that the Nobel laureate had placed him in a difficult position. Because of her differences with Burgos, Menchú was downplaying the role played by the editor of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and playing up that of Taracena.

Because the veracity of the laureate's *testimonio* was becoming problematic, her turn toward Taracena gave the impression that the former EGP liaison could share responsibility for the historical imprecisions in Menchú's text. And while the Nobel laureate hailed the ex–EGP representative, she simultaneously denied any link with his organization. Worse, Menchú began to claim an important role in the editing of her own *testimonio*, another impossibility in a web of contradictions.

From all this confusion, Taracena emerges with a certain gentility in his interview with *El Periódico*, correcting the Nobel laureate without seeming to. At the same time, Taracena feels that he has never received proper acknowledgment for his own contribution and argues that Burgos committed various injustices.

On this point I should linger for a moment. According to Taracena, in 1982 he himself was in agreement with suppressing his role, for the good of an underground organization. If Burgos had really kept the royalties, as Taracena claims, this would be a true injustice. But here Taracena and the Nobel laureate have erred, because Burgos has the receipts to prove that she sent the royalties to a solidarity committee in Paris approved by Menchú. In the end, it seems as if Burgos's alleged transgressions are limited to the issue of who is and is not mentioned in the acknowledgments.

This is no surprise because the Nobel laureate has been denouncing Burgos for the past year, for alleged crimes that change from one interview to the next. What surprises me is that Taracena feels free to condemn my book when, as he himself admits, he has read only one of the twenty chapters, a draft that I sent him and to which he never responded.

In reference to chapter 13 of my book, Taracena holds that I have committed a misdeed by eliminating small mistakes from the final product. If Taracena is a professional historian, he must know that there is nothing unusual in making corrections between drafts.

Contrary to what Taracena says, I never painted him as a political commissar, nor did I represent Menchú's story as a communist plot, least of all as a lie. But it is evident that Menchú interpreted her experience according to the ideological vision of the EGP, of which she was a member. That is not a crime, least of all under General Lucas García's regime. Actually, my own position is close to that of Taracena and Burgos, namely, that the power of Menchú's narrative cannot be explained apart from the evident capacity of the narrator herself. A puppet would not have been able to tell the story of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.

Because he rejects a book that he has not read, Taracena ignores a wealth of data that enriches our understanding of an archetypal case. Contrary to his statements, Menchú's testimony that the Guatemalan army burned her brother alive in Chajul's plaza cannot come from her family because in 1980 they had a different view of the facts, the same one expressed by residents of Chajul and human rights reports. What

everyone agrees (except Menchú two years later in Paris) is that the army shot Petrocinio and six other victims from Uspantán. What is important is not that she dramatized the way in which her brother died; the responsibility still lies with the military. What matters is that Menchú was not the eyewitness to the event that she claims to be.

Taracena is right that anthropologists try to go beyond mere journalism, that is, focusing on facts at the cost of understanding the context. We are more interested in the issue of different perspectives than in the facts themselves. However, in a case in which there is a strong tendency to idolize a preferred source of information, it has to be demonstrated that this is a partial version before proceeding to deeper issues. For example, how is it that Menchú became a cultural hero, a scapegoat, and a political saint for her various audiences inside Guatemala and internationally? In the end what has to be unmasked is not Menchú's *testimonio*, which will hold its own in history and literature, but the wish to create quasi–religious cults around it.

Translated by Arturo Arias

The Anthropologist with the Old Hat

Dante Liano

El Periódico de Guatemala, Guatemala City, Sunday, January 31, 1999

In late December 1998, some American and European newspapers saw as controversial news the publication of Stanford-trained anthropologist David Stoll's *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. The volume argued that much of Rigoberta's personal odyssey, as contained in her well-known 1982 memoir *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, was the result of deliberate distortions. Soon after, Rigoberta's defenders, among them the Spanish novelist Manuel Vázquez Montalbán and the Uruguayan essayist Eduardo Galeano, began to respond to Stoll's allegations, thus upgrading the controversy to a full-blown scandal. Another defender was Arturo Taracena Arriola, who had kept silent for sixteen years about mediating in Paris between Rigoberta and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, the editor of Rigoberta's autobiography.

Stoll's interest in the Guatemalan poor is actually old hat. His work on the subject goes back to the early 1990s, when he published his doctoral dissertation as a book, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*. There he put forth the thesis, taken as explosive today, that the forty years of war in the Central American nation, defined by ferocious massacres against indigenous peoples, were the result, to a large extent, of opposition to military dictatorships. According to him, the guerrillas did not peacefully enlist, but rather forced, the Indians to fight against the army; as a result, the latter simply performed its duty of defending the country against Communism. If thousands of people were